FERDINAND MUELLER ANNIVERSARY

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ABSTRACT

Maroske, Sara, Ferdinand Mueller Anniversary. ***Muelleria* 8(3): 395–398 (1995).** — 1995 marks the 170th anniversary of Ferdinand Mueller's birth in the city of Rostock. From humble beginnings Mueller went on to become one of the greatest botanists Australia has known despite many personal and professional hardships. This journal proudly commemorates his name.

FERDINAND MUELLER (1825–1896)

Ferdinand Jakob Heinrich Müller was born in the port city of Rostock, Mecklenberg on 30 June 1825. His father, Friedrich Müller, was a customs official, and his mother was Louise née Mertens. The family enjoyed free accommodation in the Mönchentor (one of the city gates leading to the harbour) a place which was Ferdinand Müller's home for the first ten years of his life (Fig. 1). He moved to the town of Tönning in Schleswig-Holstein after his father's death in 1835, and moved again to Husum to

Fig. 1. Mueller's birthplace, Rostock, Mecklenburg, n.d. (Original at the Library, Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne.)

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start an apprenticeship in pharmacy in 1840. From this unpretentious beginning he became Australia's greatest nineteenth-century scientist, with an international botanical reputation.

This year marks the 170th anniversary of the year of Müller's birth. When Ferdinand Müller became a naturalised British subject in South Australia in 1849, he changed the spelling of his surname to Mueller. That name is remembered in the title of this journal, *Muelleria*, which was founded to publish the botanical, horticultural and historical research of staff members of the National Herbarium of Victoria (and Royal Botanic Gardens) which itself was founded by Mueller in 1853.

Mueller made contributions to many fields of science including geography, pharmacy, medicine, horticulture, agriculture, forestry, paleontolgy, and zoology, but his major contribution was to botany. This fact is evident alone in the hundreds of Australian plant names which are followed by 'F. Muell' (or as his authorship was represented in the nineteenth-century 'F.v.M.'). Mueller, however, also played a crucial role in publicising Australian botanical knowledge nationally and internationally, and in fostering an interest in botany in other Australians, so that although no one of his stature subsequently emerged in the field, many individuals followed him whom he encouraged and assisted.

Mueller was interested in botany from his youth (Fig. 2). He studied the subject during his apprenticeship in Husum (Fig. 3), and also at Kiel University where, in 1847,

Fig. 2. Mueller at age eighteen. (Original at the Library, Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne.)

Fig. 3. The market place in Husum around the time Mueller was an apprentice at the 'Unicorn Pharmacy'. The pharmacy is the second building on the left. (Taken from a print at the Library, Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne.)

he graduated a Doctor of Philosophy[1] with a thesis on the flora of south west Schleswig. The death of his parents and a sister through tuberculosis prompted him to leave Germany with his two surviving sisters, Bertha and Clara. They chose South Australia as their destination, partly because other Germans had already settled there, and also because its flora was still relatively little known to science (Mueller to Fischer-Benzon, 16 Dec. 1887). Mueller's enthusiasm for botany is apparent from the fact that his first known Australian collection was an alga plucked from over the side of the ship as he arrived in 1847, before he had even set foot on land (Womersley & Sinkora 1987). Over the following five years which he spent in South Australia he made the decision to stay permanently in the country, and set as his goal to write Australia's flora.

Mueller moved to Victoria in 1852 and was appointed the colony's first Government Botanist the following year (a position which he held until his death in 1896). He was appointed first Director of the Botanic Gardens (1857–73), which institution for a time incorporated the zoo (1858-61). In the first decade of Mueller's career in Victoria he made substantial personal explorations of the colony, as Sophie Ducker has remarked 'it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that he covered Victoria on his hands and knees' (Ducker 1981). From 1855–6 he took part in the North Australian Exploring Expedition under the leadership of A.C. Gregory. Mueller also established an extensive network of collectors who were increasingly to do the 'leg-work' for him in the future. Much of his botanical research was published in his journal *Fragmenta phytographiae Australiae*, which he distributed widely.

The 1860s and '70s were years of less personal satisfaction to Mueller than the previous decade. He made several unsuccessful attempts to establish a happy domestic life, he was denied the authorship of Australia's flora (it went to George Bentham, a man

1. Doctor of Philosophy certificate, 2 August 1847, RB MSS M200, Library, Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne.

who never saw Australian plants in their natural habitat) and he was dismissed as Director of the Botanic Gardens. Nevertheless, these years were ones of great botanical productivity. Mueller published his anti-Darwinian work the *Flora of the Chatham Islands* in 1864, the first edition of his encyclopaedic work on economic botany, *Select extra-tropical plants* in 1876, and an educational text book for children *Introduction to Botanical Teachings* in 1877.

In old age Mueller became something of a living icon of Australian botany, well known to all the practitioners in the field and almost a household name. He published major monographs on the acacias, eucalypts, Myoporaceae and salt bushes, the *Systematic Census of Australian Plants* in 1882, and promoted the exploration of New Guinea and Antarctica through the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia. While the last decades of his life were somewhat soured by administrative struggles with the government he did receive substantial international recognition for his work in the form of numerous titles, awards and honorary memberships of scientific societies. Notable among this was his FRS in 1861, a Barony from the King of Württemberg in 1871, and a KCMG in 1879.

The 100th anniversary of Mueller's death in 1996 will provide a further opportunity to reflect on the significance of this individual's contribution to science in Australia. An international history and taxonomy conference is planned for September 1996, a grand ball at Government House in June, a pilgrimage to his grave memorial in St Kilda with Field Naturalists Club of Victoria in October, and publications by the Mueller Project and others. Mueller did not marry and had no children. Bertha had two children and Clara fifteen. Mueller often claimed to have sunk his own money into botany and died a poor man in surprisingly squalid conditions. His botanical successors are the main beneficiaries of his devotion to science, notably through his massive collections of Australian and overseas plants and in his unique botanical library, both of which are housed at the National Herbarium of Victoria.

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